

The Three C's, Why Should They Matter to You?

By Dr. Stephen A. Laser

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Stephen A. Laser Associates

**200 South Wacker Drive,
Suite 3400
Chicago, Illinois 60606**

Phone: 312-382-8200

Fax: 312-382-8286

For more information visit:

www.laserassociates.net

Key Points:

- Peers & bosses are not the root **CAUSE** of another employee's behavior
- Peers & bosses cannot **CONTROL** another person's behavior
- Peers & bosses probably cannot **CHANGE** an employee's behavior
- Employees open to change are more likely to accomplish it
- Use preemptive measures and identify problematic behaviors before extending job offers

Many years ago another psychologist introduced me to the three C's. We were discussing the frustration that many managers and supervisors were experiencing while trying to get employees to act in ways that would benefit the company and ultimately remain with the organization. With so many techniques on the market for managing performance, it seemed that something should work to bring about the desired behavioral changes in these problematic employees.

It was at that time the other psychologist asked if I had ever heard of the three C's. I told her that I had heard of the Three Tenors and maybe this too was something from the world of Opera. She assured me it wasn't. This is when she explained that much of human behavior is ingrained by the time a person reaches adulthood, and the steps a well-intended manager might take to bring about change are limited. In particular, there are three C's that govern adult behavior, and to try to counteract them is like swimming upstream against fast running rapids. In short, you aren't likely to make much progress.

So what are the three C's? Very simply, they state that peers and bosses are not the root **CAUSE** of another employee's behavior; they cannot **CONTROL** that person's behavior; and ultimately, there is little likelihood that they will **CHANGE** an employee's behavior. Hence, the three C's. While this view might sound overly pessimistic, especially to those who advocate coaching and the development of human potential, the fact is, more often than not, these observations are accurate and attempts to bring about wholesale change on the part of another person end in failure and frustration. Let's take a look at each of the three C's and explain their relevance in the workplace.

First, the notion of causation is a much debated concept. The followers of Sigmund Freud essentially believe a person's personality is largely set in place at an early age, perhaps, as young as five or six years old. Others take a less rigid view, but say that behavioral patterns are determined early regardless. From our perspective, most people have developed a consistent

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way of behaving and responding to people and events by their mid-20's. For example, a person's resistance to accepting authority is rooted in childhood and adolescence experiences as opposed to the style of their new supervisor on the job. If, perchance, an employee's new boss mirrors many of the characteristics of the person that employee struggled with earlier in life (e.g., a difficult mother or father, a frustrating teacher or athletic coach, etc.), the clash between the new employee and his or her supervisor will be exacerbated. Employees who have exaggerated needs for recognition and attention likely developed those habits competing against siblings or peers at home or in school and on the playground. In sum, the reason a problematic person behaves in a certain way has a lot less to do with the way the supervisor manages people than in the deeply imbedded factors that cause the individual to respond in predetermined ways regardless.

The idea that a boss can control his or her employees' behavior to suit their demands and the needs of the organization is an equally unrealistic notion. While the supervisor or manager exhibiting a controlling style might feel better and more in charge of the situation, the truth is that problematic behavior is very hard to control, and ultimately, it can lead to an exercise in frustration. Certainly, there are sanctions that can be issued and privileges or assignments that can be altered to try and modify the employee's actions, but again, the end result is unlikely to be particularly satisfying or productive for both parties. Most employees, both problematic and productive ones, resist being micromanaged. As a result, probably the only person feeling any semblance of satisfaction is the boss who maintains the pretense of control, when in reality meaningful modifications in employee behavior are simply not occurring.

Finally, the idea that adult behavior is subject to change is perhaps, one of the most hotly debated topics in the behavioral sciences. On the one hand, there are those who promote coaching and talent management programs using a combination of peer feedback and carefully crafted suggestions designed to bring about meaningful change. The great majority of professionals endorsing these approaches and practicing these skills are very good at their craft. They are professionally trained, dedicated, and committed to performing their roles as change-agents for organizations. On the other hand, there are those who feel that meaningful behavioral change, in any venue, be it at home or in the office, is a lost cause. They say, people are deeply ingrained in the way they behave and hence, the chances of actually changing behavior significantly are nil. The answer probably resides somewhere in the middle of these two extreme positions. Certainly

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Upcoming Topics:

- Do People Deny Who They Are and Tell You Who They Are Not?
- Staying Connected: Maximizing Efficiency or Distraction?
- What Are the Code Words of Interviewing?
- Who Is Your Least Preferred Coworker?
- Body Language: A Valuable Tool or Pop Psychology?
- Why Do People Really Get Hired?
- Do Job Coaches Make a Difference?

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not everybody is amenable to change, but yet, there have been documented instances of people making strides in the way that they relate to others.

Since the notion of change is such a widely debated topic, we would like to add our two cents. We believe in the three C's, and the concept of change is part of this paradigm. Specifically, there are too many instances when a problematic employee is assigned to a coach or included in a change-management initiative where that individual has no interest or desire to change. In fact, for these people, being placed on a performance improvement plan is akin to being sent to traffic school. They enroll in the program in order to keep their jobs (or their driver's licenses). For those who actually do want to change, the prognosis, while not overwhelmingly positive, is a lot better. One of the main determinants is flexibility. For those who can comfortably modify their behavior without a major strain or stress fracture, change is a possibility. Unfortunately, far too many problematic employees pay lip service to the desire to change, but once left to their own devices, they will more often than not, resort to their old behavioral patterns.

Is there a solution to this conundrum? We think so, and the answer resides in picking the right people in the first place. Hiring employees who are devoid of the behaviors that prove difficult to control or change is an important first step in dealing with the inevitability of the three C's. This means keying in on the critical behaviors that will potentially cause problems soon after offering that person a job. Identifying these difficult behaviors and making the proper inquiries to determine how deeply embedded they are in a candidate's personality is a job that falls to both human resources professionals as well as the hiring managers who ultimately must supervise these new hires. This is a challenge and the topic for subsequent newsletters. In the meantime, think about the three C's and their implications for your organization. Should they matter to you?